Motivational Interviewing MITRIP
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Generational Literalism

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The Swiss-American psychiatrist Elizabeth Kűbler-Ross ventured into relatively unexplored terrain (at least within psychology) in her 1969 classic *On Death and Dying*. Through conversations with terminally ill people she sought to understand how we adjust to impending death. Her now familiar five stages of grief (denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance) represented a beginning attempt to describe the journey that she witnessed. Within a generation, these stages were generalized to other forms of loss (e.g., break-ups, substance use disorders, children adjusting to divorce) and became not only descriptive but *mandatory*. In at least some counseling settings, clients were told that they had to progress through all the stages and *in the proper order*. ("No, you're not at acceptance. You skipped the anger stage, and you need go to back and work that through.") Incidentally, the existence and validity of the five stages have never been supported in peer-reviewed research.

Something similar happened with Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill Wilson's original writings, including those in the "big book" (AA World Services, 2001), reflect a humble, patient, compassionate, and open-minded man seeking to help other people like himself. Although accepting the designation "alcoholic" can be helpful and even comforting to some who are suffering, it is not, in Wilson's writing, a label ever to be imposed on someone else. All information in original AA was in the form of "suggestions" with the common advice to "take what you want and leave the rest." Yet within a generation a "twelve step treatment" industry had emerged with a too-often mirror opposite authoritarian character (Miller & Kurtz, 1994). Instead of working "by attraction," AA meetings became mandatory, and patients were expected and required to say (admit), "I am an alcoholic" as a precondition of recovery.

Fundamentalism happens in religion as well. Jesus was famously criticized for feeding the hungry and healing the sick on a Saturday, a technical violation of the rule that no work should be done on the Sabbath. Strict obedience to such rules misses the point. When asked "What is the most important rule?" he answered that it is to love God and to love others as you love yourself, which sums up all the other rules. What begins as a compassionate description can become "set in stone" as dogma, and it usually happens with the best of intentions.

That is why I fret when I encounter what smacks or literalism or fundamentalism in relation to motivational interviewing. Sometimes it happens in the form of oversimplification: All you have to do is ask these five questions, or fill in these four boxes, and you're doing MI. It can happen through trying to reduce MI to a formula or steps. In one of my more embarrassing missteps I wrote a one-session manual-guided MI intervention that required the counselors to complete a change plan at the end of the session (Miller, Yahne, & Tonigan, 2003). Without saying or realizing it, I was telling them to fill in a change plan *whether or not the client was ready* (which is clearly not MI). Subsequent psycholinguistic analyses showed that with clients who were not yet ready to commit to change, we managed to undo all the motivational progress that had been made during the session.

Literalism also comes in the form of "must" and "always" rules:

- *Never* ask closed questions
- *Always* inflect your voice downward at the end of a reflection
- *Never* offer information or advice without permission
- *Always* do the four processes in order
- *Never* ask three questions in a row
- *Always* offer two reflections per question
- *Never* confront
- *Always* reflect change talk
- *Never* ask about sustain talk

Perhaps this is a byproduct of process coding. We developed the MISC and MITI as first approximations to describe the practice of MI. They do not capture the whole picture by any means. As Terri Moyers observes, there seems to be an inverse relationship between ease of measurement and importance. That which may be most important in MI is not simple to measure. Concrete behavior counts can be coded reliably, but offer only a partial picture. The temptation is to take descriptive measures and make them prescriptive. This creates a rule-governed approach rather than a method that responds flexibly to the client's immediate experience. It also tends to ossify and restrict practice.

I hear about MI learners being criticized for violating rules like these. Yet listen to MI demonstration interviews with the above list of rules in front of you, and you will hear me and others breaking every one of them. Are these errors? From a rule-governed perspective they are indeed violations, mistakes. The ideal within a rule-governed perspective is error-free performance, as in Olympic gymnastics. I think again of the concept of *telos*, often translated as "perfect," which implies maturation rather than being free from flaws.

Specific guidelines can be helpful when one is learning a complex skill such as driving an automobile, but over time the specifics fade into an enjoyable process and the objective of arriving safely at a destination. A reminder now and then doesn't hurt ("Use your turn signal"), but skill is more than the sum of component rules. It involves flexibility, responding to the immediate situation, and remembering where you're going.

Let me draw an example from Terri Moyers' coding research. From prior research we know that a lot of confronting is linked to poor outcomes (Miller, Benefield, & Tonigan, 1993; White & Miller, 2007). Yet within skillful MI interviews she found examples of the dreaded "confront" response. Moreover, she found that the occurrence (albeit infrequent) of confront responses in MI was associated with *better* client engagement if and only if there was also a high level of MI spirit (Moyers, Miller, & Hendrickson, 2005). With low spirit, confronts predicted poor engagement, whereas in the presence of high spirit (a global measure) their impact changed. (It is also worth noting what constitutes a "confront" in MI coding— directly contradicting or disagreeing with your client. Thus

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if a client says, “I don’t think I can do it,” and the counselor responds, “Sure you can,” that is coded as a confront.)

MI is a complex skill, or rather set of skills. Excellence in the practice of MI is rather like proficiency with a sport or musical instrument. We know it when we see or hear it, yet reliable rating of that overall quality is elusive. I am clear that it is not adequately captured in compliance to behavioral rules. Such guidelines may be helpful when learning as approximations to the larger skill, and I suspect that’s how most people develop proficiency in MI over time. I have also seen prodigies who just seem to recognize the underlying skill and learn it quickly, certainly not by adhering to rules. We have made a good start in understanding how to help people learn MI, and still we have a long way to go.

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